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SUBJECT: Iranian Applicants Intimidated Yet Hopeful

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: This week's visa applicants representing a spectrum of Iranian society updated CONOFF regarding the unrest in Iran. In line with earlier reporting from Ankara, all expressed shock that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad took the election and expressed hope that the situation in Iran would change for the better. They noted that an environment of fear has reduced the number of protesters on the street but that most Iranians are still hopeful the opposition will succeed. The applicants expressed that Supreme Leader Ali Khamanei is incapable of regaining control and risks a deteriorating security situation if he does not compromise. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) While the opposition remains active, all applicants acknowledged that the government's efforts to counter them have reduced their magnitude. A young couple from Mashhad estimated that from the peak of post election protests about 20 percent still openly demonstrate. They cited beatings, killings, and rapid arrests by plain-clothed police officers loyal to Khamanei as creating an environment of fear among Mashhadis. They believed ten thousand opposition supporters are now in prison. Upon leaving Iran authorities interrogated them specifically about any intentions to go to the US Embassy in Turkey. One Tehrani noted his 15-year-old relative disappeared during earlier protests and was found when, after harassment and one month confinement, authorities called his parents to pick him up far from Tehran. One applicant said he has distanced himself from friends that participate in the opposition out of fear.

3. (SBU) Applicants also described government efforts to halt the free flow of information about the civil unrest. Many applicants revealed that international phone card services that circumvent monitoring of direct numbers were cut off by authorities for three weeks following the initial protests. Others complained that it is now much more expensive to call internationally. One applicant noted that government controlled television was broadcasting "unbelievable lies" and that one "would not believe what is really going on without being there". He added that the situation is terrible and hoped the world would take action to help the Iranian people.

4. (SBU) Applicants of all age ranges noted that the situation in Iran cannot revert back to the way it was and expressed hope for positive democratic change and better relations with the West. One applicant opined that a "the souls of Iranians have brightened" with a hope that Khamanei cannot quell. He added that calls of "God is Great" still ring from Tehran homes every evening in defiance of Khamanei. Others noted that Iranians do not want religious governance having seen its political and economic corruption and said that opposition pressure will force Khamanei to change. A Tehrani business owner said there are calls to come out every Thursday to protest. He added that in earlier rallies only sixteen thousand showed up for Ahmadinejad while three million came to support Mousavi. He explained if there is no result from the protests, the situation will escalate. A couple of applicants believe that once the opposition forms a concrete platform and calls on the population to come out, mass support would result despite government intimidation. They explained that the recent challenges to the system have led people to regain hope for change. When asked about Mousavi, applicants noted that he became the default leader by circumstance and due to his relative greater support for democracy. They also cited Ahmadinejad's reluctance to leave Iran for regional and international conferences as a sign of rifts in the regime.

Across the board, applicants expected greater democracy, a better economy, and better relations with the West as an unavoidable result of the recent events.

15. (SBU) When asked about perceptions of what the US should or should not do regarding the current unrest in light of US-Iran history, an applicant agreed that the US walks a thin line of being labeled as self-interested rather than aiding a popular democratic movement. He added that in order to succeed the people of Iran must be the sole impetus in the fight for democracy. He emphasized Iranians must have the will to "put their own souls" in the struggle to achieve democracy. He expressed that the stance taken by President Barack Obama was correct but would improve if he increased his calls against human rights abuses against the people of Iran.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Before the civil unrest in Iran many applicants demonstrated a desire for greater freedoms, but would not take the next step to openly challenge the regime. Most applicants demonstrated that they were capable of working within the repressive restraints of the system. Now many applicants are showing varying degrees of support for the opposition against the regime. The fact that some applicants spoke passionately about the fight for freedom and democracy against the regime demonstrates a restoration of confidence in the power of the Iranian people in opposition to their rulers. END COMMENT.

JEFFREY